

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
White River Field Office
220 E Market St
Meeker, CO 81641**

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0138-CX

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER: COC0119986-01

PROJECT NAME: Natural Soda Inc. Conversion of Core Hole to Water Monitoring Well

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: Sixth Principal Meridian
T 1S, R 98 W
Section 27, Lot 12

APPLICANT: Natural Soda Inc.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION:

Background/Introduction: Natural Soda Inc. (NSI) operates an in-situ sodium bicarbonate (nahcolite) solution mining operation which has been in continual operations since 1991. Their operation and processing facilities are located at the termination of Rio Blanco County (RBC) Road 31 (see Figures 1 and 2) in the Piceance Creek Basin, approximately 37 miles west and south of Meeker, Colorado. NSI current mining operations involve solution mining from five available horizontal well pairs. The processing facility was expanded in spring of 2013 increasing plant capacity from 125,000 tons per year to 250,000 tons per year. Production for 2014 is projected at approximately 180,000 tons and is anticipated to increase to the new plant capacity within the next two years.

The BLM approved a resource definition drilling program in July 2014 (DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0034-EA). The program consists of 21 core hole locations of which 13 holes were identified for potential of conversion into either subsidence or groundwater monitoring wells.

Proposed Action: NSI proposes to convert a core hole ("O") that was not identified for conversion in the 2014 drilling program to a groundwater monitoring well (Figures 1 and 2). NSI is anticipating annual sampling of the well as part of their monitoring. No new surface disturbance would be associated with the conversion. The well pad would be interim reclaimed in a similar fashion as the drilling program's identified monitoring well conversions. Interim reclamation would reduce the O well pad disturbed area to approximately 0.25 acres. There would be an associated access of 1,080 feet of (0.37 acres) stemming from an existing oil and gas road (Figure 2).

Interim reclamation would occur as soon as practical in the fall of 2014. Construction, monitoring, reclamation, and maintenance activities for NSI's facilities and well field are governed by NSI's approved mine plan.

PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW: The Proposed Action is subject to and has been reviewed for conformance with (43 CFR 1610.5-3, BLM 1601.08) the following plan:

Name of Plan: White River Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan (ROD/RMP).

Date Approved: July 1, 1997

Decision Number/Page: Page 2-6 and 2-7

Decision Language: "Facilitate the orderly and environmentally sound development of sodium resources occurring on public lands."

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION REVIEW: The Proposed Action qualifies as a categorical exclusion under 516 DM 11.9, Number F-8: *"Approval of minor modifications to or minor variances from activities described in an approved underground or surface mine plan for leasable minerals (e.g., change in mining sequence or timing)."*

The Proposed Action has been reviewed with the list of extraordinary circumstances (43 CFR 46.215) described in the table below.

Extraordinary Circumstance	YES	NO
a) Have significant adverse effects on public health and safety.		X
b) Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands; floodplains; national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.		X
c) Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources.		X
d) Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.		X
e) Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.		X
f) Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects.		X
g) Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places as determined by the bureau.		X

Extraordinary Circumstance	YES	NO
h) Have significant impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed, on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have adverse effects on designated Critical Habitat for these species.		X
i) Violate a Federal law, or a State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.		X
j) Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations.		X
k) Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites.		X
l) Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species.		X

INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW:

The Proposed Action was presented to, and reviewed by, the White River Field Office interdisciplinary team on 9/23/2014. A complete list of resource specialists who participated in this review is available upon request from the White River Field Office. The table below lists resource specialists who provided additional remarks concerning cultural resources and special status species.

Name	Title	Resource	Date
Michael Selle	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources, Native American Religious Concerns	9/26/2014
Heather Stewart	Wildlife Biologist	Special Status Wildlife Species	10/2/2014
Justina Thorsen	Ecologist	Special Status Plant Species	9/23/2014

REMARKS:

Cultural Resources: The proposed drill hole that is to be converted to an monitoring well has been inventoried by all or portions of two Class III (100 percent pedestrian) level inventories (Conner *et al* 2012 compliance dated 12/18/2013, 2014 compliance dated 7/10/2014) which did not identify any cultural resources in the core hole area or along the proposed access route. There should be no new impact to cultural resources in the area of the monitoring well if the access route is controlled and only used for access to the monitoring well location.

Native American Religious Concerns: No Native American religious concerns are known in the area, and none have been noted by Northern Ute Tribal authorities. Should recommended

inventories or future consultations with Tribal authorities reveal the existence of such sensitive properties, appropriate mitigation and/or protection measures may be undertaken.

Paleontological Resources: The proposed monitoring well is located in an area generally mapped as the Uinta Formation (Tweto 1979) which the BLM has categorized as a Potential Fossil Yield Classification (PFYC) 5 formation indicating that it is known to produce scientifically noteworthy fossil resources (c. Armstrong and Wolny 1989). Unless it becomes necessary to do any additional excavation into the underlying sedimentary rock formation to drill the hole or convert it to a monitoring well there should be no additional impacts to fossil resources in the well location.

Special Status Wildlife Species: There are no threatened and endangered wildlife species that are known to inhabit or derive important use from the project area. Big game use of the area encompassed by the Proposed Action is heaviest during the winter months. However, since there would be no additional surface disturbance, the Proposed Action is not anticipated to have any measureable effect on big game.

Special Status Plant Species: Botanical surveys were conducted by Rusty Roberts on behalf of Natural Soda in April of 2014. Survey results indicated that there was no suitable or occupied habitat observed near well O. There are no special status plant issues or concerns associated with the Proposed Action.

REFERENCES CITED:

Armstrong, Harley J., and David G. Wolny

1989 Paleontological Resources of Northwest Colorado: A Regional Analysis. Museum of Western Colorado, Grand Junction, Colorado.

Conner, Carle E., Dakota Kramer, Rich Ott, Barbara Davenport, Natalie Higginson, James C. Miller, Hannah Mills, Min Huei, Nicole Darnell and Courtney Groff

2013 Class III Cultural Resource Inventory Report for the Piceance Basin Phased Project: Phase I – Ryan Gulch and Central Facility, Phase II – East PRL, Phase II – Pipeline and Reservoirs in Rio Blanco County, Colorado, for Shell Exploration and Production Company. Grand River Institute, Grand Junction Colorado. (13-11-15: OAH # RB.LM.R1350)

Conner, Carl E., Barbara Davenport, Courtney Groff, Natalie Higginson, Dakota Kramer and Hanna Mills

2014 Class III Cultural Resources Inventory Report for the Proposed Resource Development Program, Water Supply, and Production Wells in Rio Blanco County, Colorado, for Natural Soda, Inc. Grand River Institute, Grand Junction, Colorado. (14-11-04: OAH # RB.LM.R1370)

Tweto, Ogden

1979 Geologic Map of Colorado. United States Geologic Survey, Department of the Interior, Reston, Virginia.

MITIGATION:

1. NSI is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project that they will be subject to prosecution for knowingly disturbing archaeological sites or for collecting artifacts.
2. If any archaeological materials are discovered as a result of operations under this authorization, activity in the vicinity of the discovery will cease, and the BLM WRFO Archaeologist will be notified immediately. Work may not resume at that location until approved by the AO. NSI will make every effort to protect the site from further impacts including looting, erosion, or other human or natural damage until BLM determines a treatment approach, and the treatment is completed. Unless previously determined in treatment plans or agreements, BLM will evaluate the cultural resources and, in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), select the appropriate mitigation option within 48 hours of the discovery. NSI, under guidance of the BLM, will implement the mitigation in a timely manner. The process will be fully documented in reports, site forms, maps, drawings, and photographs. The BLM will forward documentation to the SHPO for review and concurrence.
3. NSI is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project operations that they will be subject to prosecution for disturbing or collecting vertebrate or other scientifically important fossils, collecting large amounts of petrified wood (over 25lbs./day, up to 250lbs./year), or collecting fossils for commercial purposes on public lands.
4. If any paleontological resources are discovered as a result of operations under this authorization, NSI or any of his agents must stop work immediately at that site, immediately contact the BLM Paleontology Coordinator, and make every effort to protect the site from further impacts, including looting, erosion, or other human or natural damage. Work may not resume at that location until approved by the AO. The BLM or designated paleontologist will evaluate the discovery and take action to protect or remove the resource within 10 working days. Within 10 days, the operator will be allowed to continue construction through the site, or will be given the choice of either (a) following the Paleontology Coordinator's instructions for stabilizing the fossil resource in place and avoiding further disturbance to the fossil resource, or (b) following the Paleontology Coordinator's instructions for mitigating impacts to the fossil resource prior to continuing construction through the project area.
5. Any excavations into the underlying native sedimentary stone must be monitored by a permitted paleontologist. The monitoring paleontologist must be present before the start of excavations that may impact bedrock.

COMPLIANCE PLAN: "Natural Soda 2010 Mine Plan and Environmental Monitoring Plan"

NAME OF PREPARER: Paul Daggett

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR: Heather Sauls

COMPLIANCE WITH NEPA

The Proposed Action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with 516 DM 11.9, Number F-8. This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. The Proposed Action has been reviewed, and none of the extraordinary circumstances described in 43 CFR 46.215 apply.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:



Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

10/08/2014

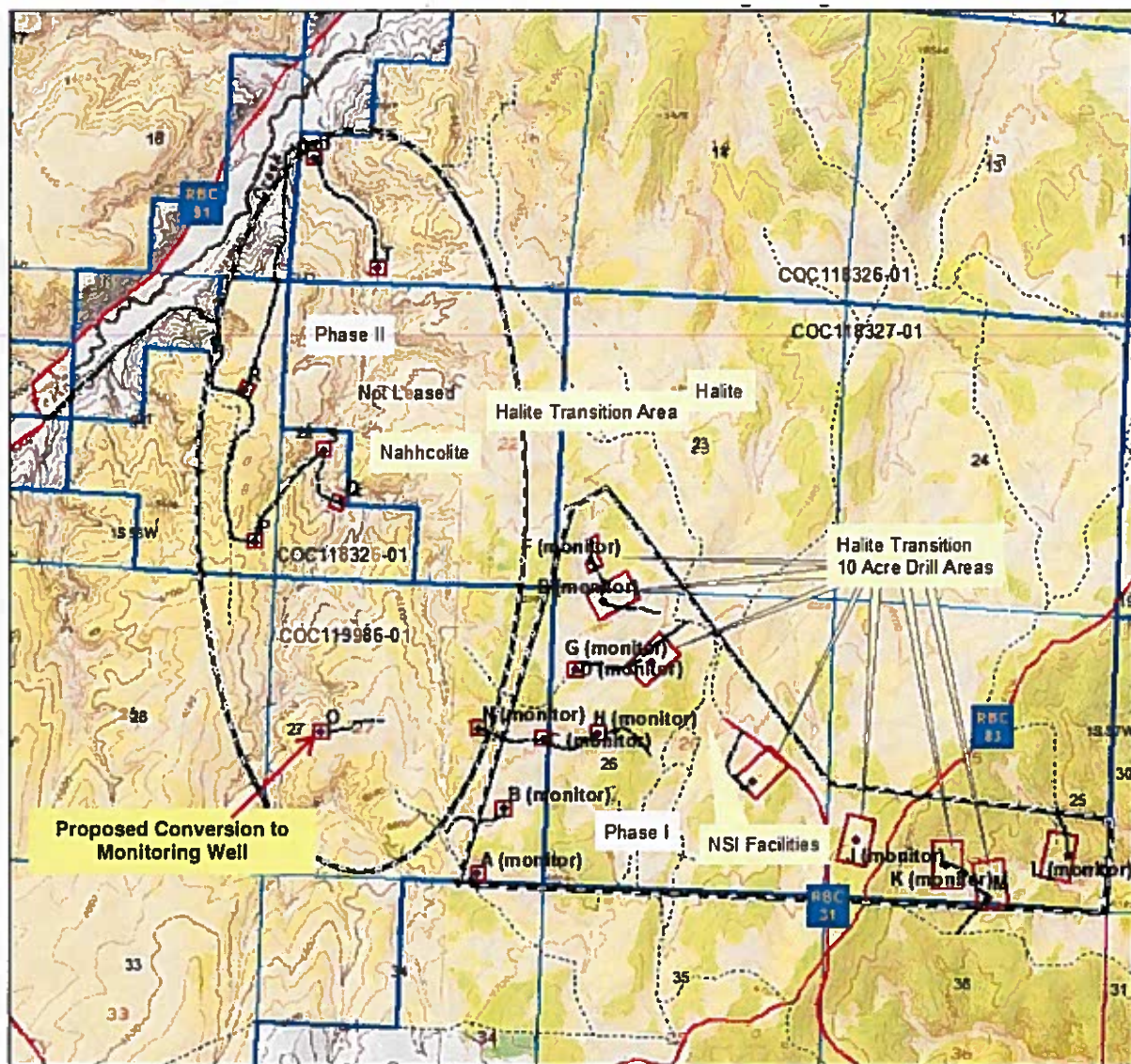
ATTACHMENTS:

Figure 1: General Location Map – Topographic

Figure 2: General Location Map – Aerial Photo

Figure 1: General Location Map – Topographic

DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0138-CX
Natural Soda Inc. Conversion of Core Hole to Water Monitoring Well



T. 1 S., R. 98 W., 6th P.M.
 Sec: 15, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, & 27

7/15/2014

--- Access
 [Red Outline] Hole Location Area

0 0.5 1
 Miles



Disclaimer:
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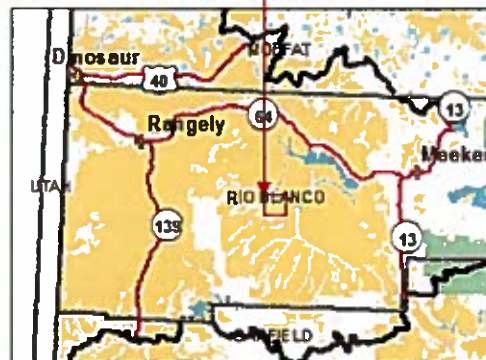
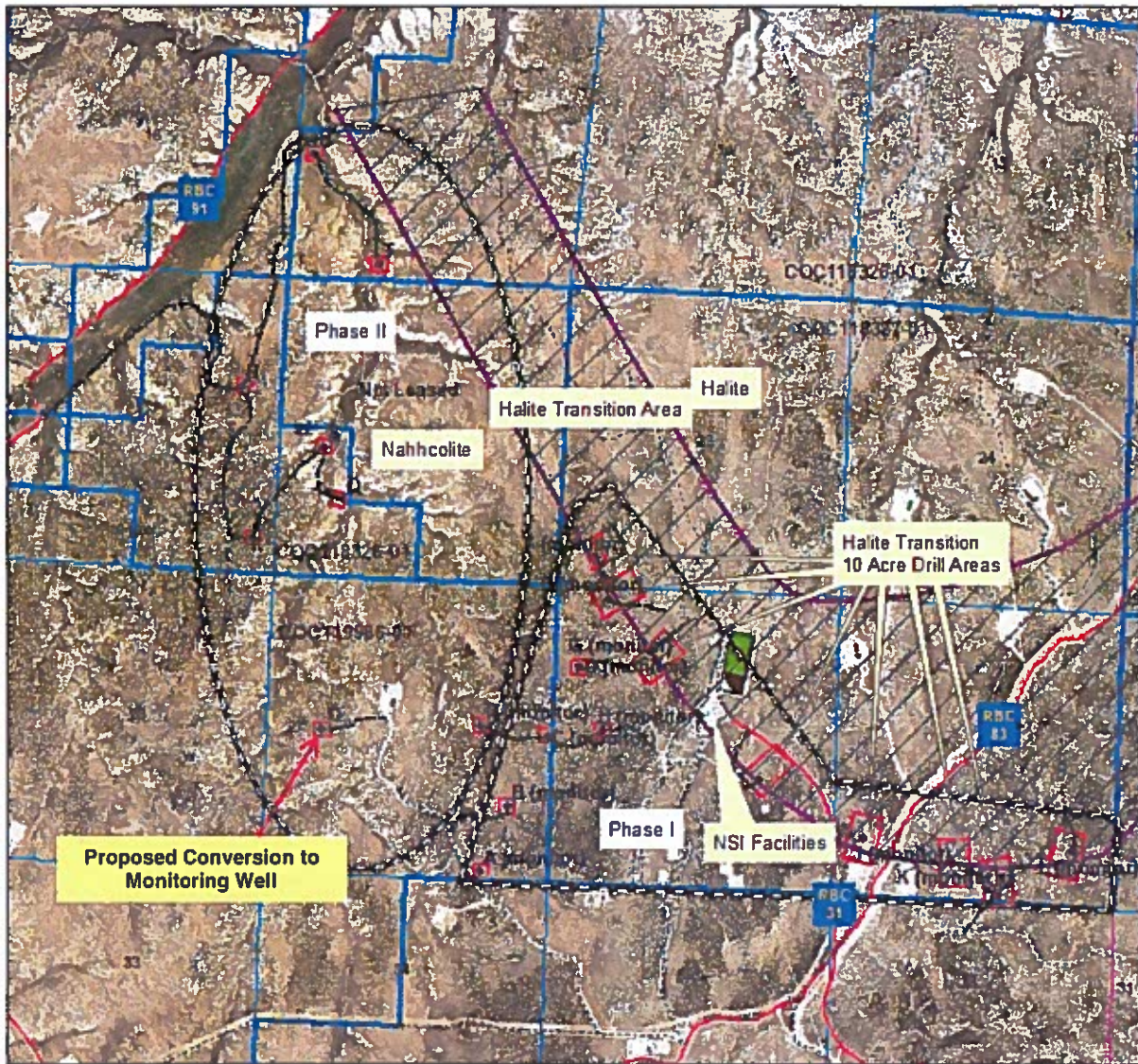


Figure 2: General Location Map – Aerial Photo

DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0138-CX
Natural Soda Inc. Conversion of Core Hole to Water Monitoring Well



T. 1 S., R. 98 W., 6th P.M.
Sec: 15, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, & 27

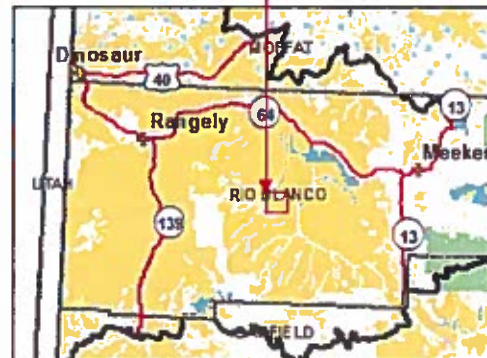
7/15/2014

— Access
 [Red Box] Hole Location Area

0 0.5 1
 Miles



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DECISION RECORD

PROJECT NAME: Natural Soda Inc. Conversion of Core Hole to Water Monitoring Well

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0138-CX

DECISION

It is my decision to implement the Proposed Action, as mitigated in DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0138-CX, authorizing the conversion and maintenance, of core hole O to a groundwater monitoring well.

Mitigation Measures

1. NSI is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project that they will be subject to prosecution for knowingly disturbing archaeological sites or for collecting artifacts.
2. If any archaeological materials are discovered as a result of operations under this authorization, activity in the vicinity of the discovery will cease, and the BLM WRFO Archaeologist will be notified immediately. Work may not resume at that location until approved by the AO. NSI will make every effort to protect the site from further impacts including looting, erosion, or other human or natural damage until BLM determines a treatment approach, and the treatment is completed. Unless previously determined in treatment plans or agreements, BLM will evaluate the cultural resources and, in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), select the appropriate mitigation option within 48 hours of the discovery. NSI, under guidance of the BLM, will implement the mitigation in a timely manner. The process will be fully documented in reports, site forms, maps, drawings, and photographs. The BLM will forward documentation to the SHPO for review and concurrence.
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damage. Work may not resume at that location until approved by the AO. The BLM or designated paleontologist will evaluate the discovery and take action to protect or remove the resource within 10 working days. Within 10 days, the operator will be allowed to continue construction through the site, or will be given the choice of either (a) following the Paleontology Coordinator's instructions for stabilizing the fossil resource in place and avoiding further disturbance to the fossil resource, or (b) following the Paleontology Coordinator's instructions for mitigating impacts to the fossil resource prior to continuing construction through the project area.

5. Any excavations into the underlying native sedimentary stone must be monitored by a permitted paleontologist. The monitoring paleontologist must be present before the start of excavations that may impact bedrock.

COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS & CONFORMANCE WITH THE LAND USE PLAN

This decision is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. It is also in conformance with the 1997 White River Record of Decision/Approved Resource Management Plan.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The BLM informed the public about this project by listing it on the online WRFO NEPA Register on 9/23/2014 and a copy of the completed Categorical Exclusion will be posted on the WRFO website.

RATIONALE

The Proposed Action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with 516 DM 11.9, Number F-8. This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. The Proposed Action has been reviewed, and none of the extraordinary circumstances described in 43 CFR 46.215 apply.

ADMINISTRATIVE REMEDIES

Any appeal of this decision must follow the procedures set forth in 43 CFR Part 4. Within 30 days of the decision, a Notice of Appeal must be filed in the office of the Authorized Officer at White River Field Office, 220 East Market St., Meeker, CO 81641 with copies sent to the Regional Solicitor, Rocky Mountain Region, 755 Parfet St., Suite 151, Lakewood, CO 80215, and to the Department of the Interior, Board of Land Appeals, 801 North Quincy St., MS300-QC, Arlington, VA, 22203. If a statement of reasons for the appeal is not included with the notice, it must be filed with the Interior Board of Land Appeals at the above address within 30 days after the Notice of Appeal is filed with the Authorized Officer.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:



Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

10/08/14